

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA**

ELIJAH WASHINGTON,	:	Civil No. 3:13-CV-2820
	:	
Plaintiff,	:	
	:	
v.	:	(Judge Kosik)
	:	
DAUPHIN COUNTY PRISON, et al.,	:	(Magistrate Judge Carlson)
	:	
Defendants.	:	

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

I. Statement of Facts and of The Case

A. Procedural History

This is a *pro se* civil rights case filed by the plaintiff, Elijah Washington. According to his various complaints, Washington is presently housed in the State Correctional Institution, Houtzdale, but was held in the Dauphin County Prison in March of 2012. In his complaint Washington initially identified the warden at the Dauphin County prison, and two John Doe correctional officers as defendants. (Doc. 1) While the warden was the only defendant specifically identified in this complaint, there were no factual averments made in the complaint about the warden beyond a general assertion that the warden “is legally responsible for the overall operation of Dauphin County Prison.” (Id., ¶5.)

The complaint then alleged that in March of 2012, Washington was assigned to the top bunk of a cell at the prison. (*Id.*) According to Washington, after “gingerly” ascending to the top bunk, he “immediately became engrossed in a conundrum [w]here Plaintiff found Himself wondering how He would get down from the top-bunk.” (*Id.*, ¶10.) Acknowledging that he was “by no means a gymnast” Washington states that he jumped off of the top bunk, injuring his leg. (*Id.*) According to Washington, he called out for help but was initially denied assistance by two unnamed correctional officers. (*Id.*) Despite this initial denial of assistance, Washington admits that on the same day that this accident took place, he was transported to Harrisburg Hospital, x-rayed, and within a week was treated at the Polyclinic Hospital for a bone chip in his left knee. (*Id.*) One week later, Washington states he was transferred to state custody. (*Id.*) On the basis of these averments, averments which did not describe any actions taken by the prison warden, Washington sued the warden and the two unnamed officers, seeking \$400,000 in damages. Moreover, despite the fact that by his own admission he has not been housed in the Dauphin County Prison for at least 20 months, Washington also sought injunctive relief from these defendants.

Along with his complaint, Washington filed a motion seeking leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (Doc. 2) We granted the motion for leave to proceed *in forma*

pauperis, but as part of our legally-mandated screening review we found that Washington had failed to state a claim upon which relief may be granted. Therefore, we recommended that the Court dismiss the claims lodged against these defendants for failure to presently state a claim upon which relief can be granted, without prejudice to allowing the plaintiff to attempt to correct the deficiencies noted in this report and recommendation by filing an amended complaint. (Doc. 5) The district court adopted this report and recommendation, (Doc. 8), and dismissed Washington's complaint without prejudice to the filing of an amended complaint. Washington has now filed an amended complaint, which recites that several, currently unidentified staff, were deliberately indifferent to his medical needs by ignoring his injuries on March 6, 2012. (Doc. 9) While the amended complaint seeks to hold these individual staff liable for alleged civil rights violations, it also names the Dauphin County Prison as an institutional defendant. (Id.)

For the reasons set forth below, it is recommended that the Dauphin County Prison be dismissed as a defendant in this action.

II. Discussion

A. Screening of *Pro Se In forma Pauperis* Complaints—Standard of Review

This Court has an on-going statutory obligation to conduct a preliminary review of *pro se* complaints brought by plaintiffs given leave to proceed *in forma pauperis* in cases which seek redress against government officials. Specifically, we are obliged to review the complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A which provides, in pertinent part:

(a) Screening. - The court shall review, before docketing, if feasible or, in any event, as soon as practicable after docketing, a complaint in a civil action in which a prisoner seeks redress from a governmental entity or officer or employee of a governmental entity.

(b) Grounds for dismissal. - On review, the court shall identify cognizable claims or dismiss the complaint, or any portion of the complaint, if the complaint-

(1) is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted; or

(2) seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.

Under Section 1915A, the Court must assess whether a *pro se* complaint “fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.” This statutory text mirrors the language of Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which provides

that a complaint should be dismissed for “failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6).

With respect to this benchmark standard for legal sufficiency of a complaint, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has aptly noted the evolving standards governing pleading practice in federal court, stating that:

Standards of pleading have been in the forefront of jurisprudence in recent years. Beginning with the Supreme Court's opinion in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007) continuing with our opinion in Phillips [v. County of Allegheny, 515 F.3d 224, 230 (3d Cir. 2008)]and culminating recently with the Supreme Court's decision in Ashcroft v. Iqbal –U.S.–, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009) pleading standards have seemingly shifted from simple notice pleading to a more heightened form of pleading, requiring a plaintiff to plead more than the possibility of relief to survive a motion to dismiss.

Fowler v. UPMC Shadyside, 578 F.3d 203, 209-10 (3d Cir. 2009).

In considering whether a complaint fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, the Court must accept as true all allegations in the complaint and all reasonable inferences that can be drawn from the complaint are to be construed in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. Jordan v. Fox Rothschild, O'Brien & Frankel, Inc., 20 F.3d 1250, 1261 (3d Cir. 1994). However, a court “need not credit a complaint’s bald assertions or legal conclusions when deciding a motion to dismiss.” Morse v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997). Additionally a court need not “assume that a ... plaintiff can prove facts that the ... plaintiff has not

alleged.” Associated Gen. Contractors of Cal. v. California State Council of Carpenters, 459 U.S. 519, 526 (1983). As the Supreme Court held in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), in order to state a valid cause of action a plaintiff must provide some factual grounds for relief which “requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of actions will not do.” Id. at 555. “Factual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.” Id.

In keeping with the principles of Twombly, the Supreme Court has underscored that a trial court must assess whether a complaint states facts upon which relief can be granted when ruling on a motion to dismiss. In Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662 (2009), the Supreme Court held that, when considering a motion to dismiss, a court should “begin by identifying pleadings that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.” Id. at 679. According to the Supreme Court, “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.” Id. at 678. Rather, in conducting a review of the adequacy of complaint, the Supreme Court has advised trial courts that they must:

[B]egin by identifying pleadings that because they are no more than conclusions are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be

supported by factual allegations. When there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief.

Id. at 679.

Thus, following Twombly and Iqbal a well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere legal labels and conclusions. Rather, a complaint must recite factual allegations sufficient to raise the plaintiff's claimed right to relief beyond the level of mere speculation. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has stated:

[A]fter Iqbal, when presented with a motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim, district courts should conduct a two-part analysis. First, the factual and legal elements of a claim should be separated. The District Court must accept all of the complaint's well-pleaded facts as true, but may disregard any legal conclusions. Second, a District Court must then determine whether the facts alleged in the complaint are sufficient to show that the plaintiff has a "plausible claim for relief." In other words, a complaint must do more than allege the plaintiff's entitlement to relief. A complaint has to "show" such an entitlement with its facts.

Fowler, 578 F.3d at 210-11.

In practice, consideration of the legal sufficiency of a complaint entails a three-step analysis: "First, the court must 'tak[e] note of the elements a plaintiff must plead to state a claim.' Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1947. Second, the court should identify allegations that, 'because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the

assumption of truth.’ *Id.* at 1950. Finally, ‘where there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement for relief.’ *Id.*” Santiago v. Warminster Tp., 629 F.3d 121, 130 (3d Cir. 2010).

In addition to these pleading rules, a civil complaint must comply with the requirements of Rule 8(a) of the Federal Rule of Civil Procedure which defines what a complaint should say and provides that:

- (a) A pleading that states a claim for relief must contain (1) a short and plain statement of the grounds for the court’s jurisdiction, unless the court already has jurisdiction and the claim needs no new jurisdictional support; (2) a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief; and (3) a demand for the relief sought, which may include relief in the alternative or different types of relief.

Thus, a well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere legal labels and conclusions. Rather, a *pro se* plaintiff’s complaint must recite factual allegations which are sufficient to raise the plaintiff’s claimed right to relief beyond the level of mere speculation, set forth in a “short and plain” statement of a cause of action.

In this regard, one of the basic requisites for a civil complaint is that it must recites some essential facts tying the defendants to some alleged misconduct. This fundamental requirement is driven both by matters of principle, and by pragmatic considerations. As a matter of principle and practice, a basic factual recital is

essential in a complaint because it is simply impossible without such averments to properly assign individual responsibility to a particular defendant without some factual description of what has transpired. Therefore, it is incumbent upon a plaintiff to describe who he seeks to sue, and what these parties did that violated the plaintiff's rights. When a plaintiff fails in this basic responsibility, it is the duty of the court to dismiss his claims. See, e.g., Moss v. United States, 329 F. App'x 335 (3d Cir. 2009)(dismissing illegible complaint); Radin v. Jersey City Medical Center, 375 F. App'x 205 (3d Cir. 2010); Earnest v. Ling, 140 F. App'x 431 (3d Cir. 2005)(dismissing complaint where "complaint fails to clearly identify which parties [the plaintiff] seeks to sue"); Oneal v. U.S. Fed. Prob., CIV.A. 05-5509 (MLC), 2006 WL 758301 (D.N.J. Mar. 22, 2006)(dismissing complaint consisting of approximately 50 pages of mostly-illegible handwriting); Gearhart v. City of Philadelphia Police, CIV.A.06-0130, 2006 WL 446071 (E.D. Pa. Feb. 21, 2006) dismissing illegible complaint).

B. The Dauphin County Prison Is Not a Proper Defendant

Judged against these legal benchmarks, Washington's amended *pro se* complaint fails to state a claim against the institutional defendant named in this pleading, the Dauphin County Prison. In this case, Washington alleges that individual, unnamed staff were deliberately indifferent to his medical needs after he

suffered a fall at the prison, conduct which the plaintiff alleges amounted to cruel and unusual punishment in violation of his Constitutional rights under the Eighth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

As to this legal claim, the constitutional standards are clear: “When an Eighth Amendment claim arises in the context of a challenge to conditions of confinement, we must determine if prison officials acted with ‘deliberate indifference’ to the inmate’s health. Farmer v. Brennan, 511 U.S. 825, 837, 114 S.Ct. 1970, 128 L.Ed.2d 811 (1994). The objective inquiry is whether the inmate was ‘denied the minimal civilized measure of life’s necessities.’ Hudson, 503 U.S. at 9, 112 S.Ct. 995.” Fuentes v. Wagner, 206 F.3d 335, 345 (3d Cir. 2000). In this setting:

The Eighth Amendment prohibits punishments inconsistent with “evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society.” Estelle v. Gamble, 429 U.S. 97, 102, 97 S.Ct. 285, 50 L.Ed.2d 251 (1976) (quoting Trop v. Dulles, 356 U.S. 86, 101, 78 S.Ct. 590, 2 L.Ed.2d 630 (1958)). Conditions of prison confinement violate the Eighth Amendment only if they “deprive inmates of the minimal civilized measure of life’s necessities.” Rhodes v. Chapman, 452 U.S. 337, 347, 101 S.Ct. 2392, 69 L.Ed.2d 59 (1981)

Atkinson v. Taylor, 316 F.3d 257, 272 (3d Cir. 2003).

Thus, these claims typically require proof of both culpable state of mind, and objective proof of physical conditions of confinement which shock the conscience and depart from minimal civilized standards of life’s necessities.

While we do not opine at this early stage of the litigation regarding whether Washington can state a valid Eighth Amendment claim against any staff who may have delayed medical treatment for this prisoner, we note that Washington may not maintain a prisoner civil rights action against the county prison as an institution. Rather, inmate civil rights actions under 42 U.S.C. §1983 may only be brought against: “Every *person* who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State or Territory or the District of Columbia, subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws [of the United States].” 42 U.S.C. § 1983 (emphasis added).

Thus, §1983 expressly limits liability to *persons* who violate constitutional rights, a limitation that courts have construed as not reaching county jails as institutions. In short, “the ‘County Jail’ is not a proper defendant in this § 1983 case[], because it is not a ‘person.’ See Grabow v. Southern State Correctional Facility, 726 F.Supp. 537, 538-39 (D.N.J.1989)(stating that New Jersey Department of Corrections and state prison facilities not “persons” under § 1983); Mitchell v. Chester County Farms Prison, 426 F.Supp. 271, 274 (D.C.Pa.1976); see also Marsden v. Federal BOP, 856 F.Supp. 832, 836 (S.D.N.Y.1994) (county jail not an entity

amenable to suit under 42 U.S.C. § 1983); Powell v. Cook County Jail, 814 F.Supp. 757, 758 (N.D.Ill.1993) (Cook County Jail not a ‘person’ under § 1983); McCoy v. Chesapeake Correctional Center, 788 F.Supp. 890, 893-94 (E.D.Va.1992) (local jail not a ‘person’ under § 1983).” Crooks v. Passaic County Sheriff’s Dep’t/Jail, CIV. 07-0092 (FSH), 2007 WL 923330 (D.N.J. Mar. 26, 2007). See also, Thomas v. Wilbert, CIV.A. 09-4796 GEB, 2011 WL 91001 (D.N.J. Jan. 11, 2011)(“County Correctional Institution is not a proper defendant in a § 1983 case and must be dismissed from this action”). This limitation on the reach of proper defendants in an Eighth Amendment conditions of confinement claim compels dismissal of this particular conditions of confinement claim, as stated in this *pro se* complaint, with respect to the county jail, which is not a proper defendant in a civil rights action brought under §1983.

III. Recommendation

Accordingly, for the foregoing reasons, IT IS RECOMMENDED that the plaintiff’s amended complaint (Doc. 9), be dismissed as to the Dauphin County Prison.

The Parties are further placed on notice that pursuant to Local Rule 72.3:

Any party may object to a magistrate judge’s proposed findings, recommendations or report addressing a motion or matter described in 28 U.S.C. § 636 (b)(1)(B) or making a recommendation for the

disposition of a prisoner case or a habeas corpus petition within fourteen (14) days after being served with a copy thereof. Such party shall file with the clerk of court, and serve on the magistrate judge and all parties, written objections which shall specifically identify the portions of the proposed findings, recommendations or report to which objection is made and the basis for such objections. The briefing requirements set forth in Local Rule 72.2 shall apply. A judge shall make a de novo determination of those portions of the report or specified proposed findings or recommendations to which objection is made and may accept, reject, or modify, in whole or in part, the findings or recommendations made by the magistrate judge. The judge, however, need conduct a new hearing only in his or her discretion or where required by law, and may consider the record developed before the magistrate judge, making his or her own determination on the basis of that record. The judge may also receive further evidence, recall witnesses or recommit the matter to the magistrate judge with instructions.

Submitted this 30th day of December, 2013.

S/Martin C. Carlson

Martin C. Carlson
United States Magistrate Judge